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The Savage Breast

News bulletin: Unknown vandals damaged several strings on the grand piano at American Ambassador Arthur Hartman's Moscow residence Sunday just hours before Vladimir Feltsman, a prominent pianist and Jewish dissident, was to perform there. One string had been cut, three others bent and two more put out of tune.

After the cold war went into its musical phase I had a call from the agency. "You used to cover the White House under Eisenhower," the guy said.

I told him to keep telling me about myself, as I sounded like a fascinating fellow.

"In those days you hung out in a gin joint down the hill from Camp David."

"All us reporters hung out in gin joints in those days," I said. "In those days a reporter could get fired for hanging out in wine-spritzer joints."

"And you used to gum up their pinball machines by putting ketchup in the coin slots," he said.

"So what, copper?"

"So what do you know about gumming up woodwinds?" he replied. Thus began my new career.

I still recall the rage I felt as a newcomer to longhair warfare when the agency's classical-music division heard what the K.G.B. had done to the Philadelphia Orchestra's piano while it sat unguarded on a Leningrad stage. Itching powder smeared over the keyboard was pushing things a bit far.

Yes, I cried, I would gladly volunteer for an assignment of the greatest delicacy. The chief, known even to the President only as B-Flat, outlined the problem:

The Soviet Embassy in Washington planned a party to celebrate Karl Marx's birthday. The embassy's

My career in the musical cold war

K.G.B. boss, who had become the world's foremost bassoonist as a cover for his espionage activities, intended to perform "Just a Guy Called Karl," a bassoon solo of his own composition.

My assignment: Avenge the itching powder on the Philadelphia's Steinway!

Unfortunately, the embassy party was for comrades only, so few outsiders learned of the K.G.B. man's temper tantrum three minutes into his solo after discovering that his bassoon had been stuffed with three pounds of peanut butter, chunky style.

Moscow learned, though, and the K.G.B. man was reassigned to Australia under orders to become the world's foremost performer on the didgeridoo.

We knew the K.G.B. would reply viciously. We had seen most of its tricks: sawing off the piano legs so Vladimir Horowitz had to lie flat on his stomach to play Beethoven's Eroica, filling the Chicago Symphony's drums with slivovitz. This time, though, we expected something diabolical.

That's when B-Flat said, "I want you to go out into the cold."

I had seen enough spy movies to know what that meant: B-Flat wanted me to become a double agent, gain the confidence of the K.G.B. classical-music warfare group and find out what Moscow was planning.

Afterward B-Flat would have to let the K.G.B. kill me to prove he was not a sentimentalist but somebody they could do business with. This was fine with me, because being with the other side would make my book twice as valuable after I left the agency, especially if neither the K.G.B. nor B-Flat managed to get me killed.

So in no time at all musically inclined comrades were meeting me on park benches, where I learned about Moscow's research on conductors' batons.

Scientists working in caves hidden behind the Ural Mountains had been toiling to produce a pure white peppermint stick so indistinguishable from a conductor's baton that not even a child could tell that the sweet, sticky confection was not simply a dry stick for waving at fiddle players. When warmed by the conductor's handling, though, the peppermint would melt and coat his hands with sweet gluey sugars that would have him frantically licking his fingers before vast audiences.

One night on a Washington park bench I learned that Soviet science had scored the breakthrough. Peppermint batons were already in a dozen American symphony halls. That very night their first victim was to be Leonard Bernstein, conducting the National Symphony before a Washington audience.

I recalled that Mr. Bernstein liked to embrace his audiences after performing, and so, having led both B-Flat and my K.G.B. assassins to the concert, I left both of them glued firmly into Mr. Bernstein's beautifully expressive hands, quit the agency and went back to reporting. Sure it's drab, but it's not the dumbest work around. □